

6th Sunday of Easter  
May 13 & 14, 2023

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### Synodality

Wow! It doesn't seem possible that this is the Sixth Sunday that we have been celebrating Easter — Christ's Resurrection ...from the cold 26° 'Sunrise Mass' to today's beautiful blossoms and 80° ...! Today's Gospel reminds us of the core meaning of Easter: Love! We experience the resurrection of Jesus within us and among us when we love; *God is love* and where there is *Love* there is *God*!

On this Sixth Sunday of Easter, we now approach Pentecost – often called the birthday of the Church – when, as today's Gospel points out, we celebrate the coming of the gift of The Holy Spirit: The Spirit of Truth; ... and, God knows how much we need the truth in our world and nation and, even our Church in this time of such polarization, division and blindness to the truth – the truth that sets us free.... !

Like our wider culture, our Church at this time is struggling: falling numbers of practicing Catholics, shortage of clergy, clericalism and patriarchy, the aftershock of the horrendous sexual abuse crisis, cover-up and, now, Chapter 11; role of women, exclusion of minorities, outdated teachings on human sexuality and the list goes on... ..

But there is hope!

Every Easter Season, the First Reading at Sunday and daily mass comes from the *Acts of the Apostles*, thought to be in written by Luke after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. *Acts* is kind of like a "Live Eye Report" on the infant Christian community. As we've heard in the readings from *Acts*, problems, crises, opposing opinions, differing ideologies... were part of the picture back then too. Now, 2000 years later, there is a lot we as Church can learn from how the community back then worked through their problems and faced the issues of their times without demonizing and excluding, polarizing and excommunicating "the other" and creating 'insiders' and 'outsiders.'

A couple of examples:

In Chapter 15 of *Acts*, the Church faces a major crisis: through the efforts of the Community, particularly the work of disciples Paul, Barnabas, with others; The Holy Spirit was moving within the community. Gentiles – non-Jews – were accepting Jesus as their Savior and being baptized. Before this moment, all the disciples were Jews and followed the Jewish customs and regulations including circumcision and dietary restrictions. All kinds of opposing opinions emerged: on one side the sentiment was that "of course" the Gentiles must follow all Jewish regulations and on the other, from people like Paul and Barnabas, was the insight that imposing all kinds of foreign regulations on people would pose obstacles to their joining... What did they do?

*“It was resolved by the apostles, the elders in agreement with the whole Jerusalem Church - it is a decision of the Holy Spirit and ours too, not to lay on you any burdens beyond that which is strictly necessary.”*

Circumcision and other Jewish regulations were no longer requirements to becoming a Christian... (and, thank God, otherwise Christianity would've likely ended up being simply a small Jewish cult)!

Another example from Acts proclaimed at last Sunday's mass: the Greek community was all upset and complaining that their widows were being neglected during the distribution of food compared with the Hebrew women and children. (Remember there was no Social Security at the time, the community had to take care of widows and orphans).

What did the church do?

*“The twelve assembled the whole community, who concluded this isn't right or fair. Let us appoint seven deeply spiritual disciples to oversee the distribution of goods. The proposal was unanimously accepted by the community.”*

Sisters and brothers, what we can glean from that infant Church, through the *Acts of the Apostles* and the early writings of the mothers and fathers of the Church, is that when conflict arose or when major decisions needed to be made, the servant leaders sought out the whole community, who, first: listened to one another and then: discerned where the Holy Spirit was leading them as The Church.

That is what Pope Francis is trying to reignite in the Church today — not creating something entirely new, but going back to how the early church functioned, before the Christian community got into bed with the Roman Empire and embraced the hierarchical model that exists to this day.

The model of the infant Church - reseeded in the Second Vatican Council - is called the “Synodal Model:” listening together..., listening to one another while discerning where The Holy Spirit is leading us.

St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, put it well: *“Do nothing without the Council: the presbyters, the deacons and the consensus of all the people!”*

We can imagine the Synodal Process as a circle: all the people, clergy, bishops, cardinals and Pope listening to one another, guided by The Holy Spirit who is in the center and in the heart of each of the Baptized!

That circle, through the centuries, was by and large replaced by the model of the Roman Empire: a pyramid with the Pope on top, cardinals, bishops, priests, perhaps the religious, and at the bottom: the 99% of the Baptized with no voice other than to just pray, pay and obey....

Unfortunately, by-and-large, although there has been some reform following Vatican II (parish councils, priest councils, diocesan councils), we still function in the pyramid model and there is huge resistance to what Pope Francis is trying to do. A sad example: a Committee of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops recently came out with a Pastoral Letter to guide the Church on issues of Transgender and Sexual Identity. The Document was created without consulting mainline psychologists, moral theologians or biologists or, of course, transgender people themselves!

According to many moral theologians, the Document “is a biological, theological and pastoral disaster” that will only hurt trans folks and drive more people out of the church.

Sisters and brothers, here at All Saints since we began in 2008, almost 15 years ago, we’ve been attempting to function as a Parish in a synodal way. Every major decision is brought to the *whole community* through the Pastoral Team, Pastoral Council and Trustees and with input – and often voting opportunities – for all parishioners. Examples include our decision to purchase Bishop Harrison Center, to put an elevator (at the cost of \$350,000) in the Bishop Harrison Center, becoming a Sanctuary Parish and dedicating the house at 1124 Oak St. – gifted to us by Fr. Tony Keefe – as a home for New Americans. But we need to keep expanding the process of listening to one another and discerning where The Spirit is leading.

In that spirit, our Pastoral Council is initiating a synodal process that will guide the future of our Parish for the next five years or so, and is asking all of us to pray and reflect on four core questions:

- 1) What are each of us looking for in our All Saints Parish faith community? How can or how is the Parish feeding and challenging us as Catholic Christians?
- 2) As a Catholic, what attracts you to All Saints versus other parishes for some We’re down the block...; for others: an hours drive away...; and to others: a Zoom connection!
- 3) What can I or what do I bring to All Saints Parish? Do I feel part of the Parish?
- 4) What is your vision and commitment to our Parish in the next five years or so, considering the likelihood that we might not have a priest-pastor in the future. *I have no intention of going anywhere...* but when I’m not here, it is doubtful I will be replaced by a priest-pastor; rather might we function with a Pastoral Team as servant leaders to the community with sacramental ministry provided by other priests?

In other words: how can we ensure that our diverse and inclusive and welcoming Parish continues to thrive, as we look to the future? How might we be *proactive, to the extent possible, to ensure our future?* Can we listen to one another and discern where The Spirit is leading us?

The first phase of this Process begins this weekend with listening sessions: after each mass today — led by Pastoral Council Members as facilitators and recorders and without the presence of the Pastoral Team. The second phase will involve a survey based on the input we gather in these listening sessions, intended to solicit the widest possible input from parishioners local and remote! We will then move to a phase of communal discernment, completed, we anticipate, by our 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in November of this year.

Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas said it well:

*“The synodal process is a seed planted that offers hope of renewing our sense of community identity and mission as Catholics in the world. It is not a quick fix, it is a renewal of the way forward in a way proper to our baptismal dignity.”*

And our Pope Francis says:

*“It is precisely the path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”*

Amen!